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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIGA 000411

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [LG](#)
SUBJECT: LATVIA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION - A TRAGIC-COMEDY
IN THREE ACTS

REF: A) 06 RIGA 792 B) RIGA 322 C) RIGA 392 D) RIGA 402

Classified By: Charge d'affaires Tamir G. Waser. Reason: 1.4 (d)

11. (C/NF) Summary: Latvia's Saeima (parliament) will vote May 31 for a new President to replace Vaira Vike-Freiberga as she completes eight years in office. The outcome remains unclear. The coalition candidate, Valdis Zatlers, has no political experience, has been underwhelming in press and public appearances, and is dogged by allegations that as a physician he took payments from patients beyond his normal fees. The opposition candidate, Aivars Endzins, has a much stronger political background, but by virtue of being the opposition candidate, faces considerable odds. The most likely outcomes are either a Zatlers victory or forcing a new round of voting with an opportunity for new candidates. No matter the outcome, the process shows the weaknesses of the Latvian political system where loyalty to a coalition, despite its own internal problems, remains the most significant qualification of any candidate for any office. The continued general apathy of the Latvian public to political developments only fosters these tendencies, which have potentially negative consequences for U.S. interests, especially in the area of rule of law. End summary.

Prologue - Parliamentary elections

12. (U) When Latvians voted last fall for a new Parliament, everyone knew that electing the next president would be a major task of the new legislature (ref A). While there was some discussion of this among the chattering classes, it played no discernable role in the election outcome. Only one party, center-right New Era (JL), even made it a campaign issue when they announced that former FM and EU commissioner Sandra Kalniete would be its presidential candidate. Other parties all disparaged the idea of naming a candidate so early.

Act I - Going through the motions

13. (U) At the beginning of 2007, with a new four-party governing coalition in place, the press and some politicians began to suggest that it was time to consider who would be the next president. The coalition said it was premature, professing concern that early nominations would only lead to attacks on the potential candidates and saying it was unwise to subject candidates to too much public scrutiny. President Vike-Freiberga attempted to move the process by suggesting in late January a package of laws and constitutional amendments to regulate the process and ensure that candidates are known and can be publicly vetted in advance. Vike-Freiberga, herself a surprise candidate in 1999, had some credibility in raising this issue, but was ignored by the coalition who saw her as a lame duck. However, once she began the process of submitting the amendments to the security laws to a referendum, the politicians took notice and quickly passed legislation to regulate the presidential election process

(ref B).

¶4. (C) At the end of April, the People's Party (TP), largest of the coalition parties, nominated the PM's chief of staff and former Ambassador to Washington, Maris Riekstins, as its candidate for President. His selection, however, hinged on a last minute change of heart by PM Kalvitis who had been backing Regional Development Minister Aigars Stokenbergs for the post. Following Stokenbergs' speech to the party, Kalvitis suddenly announced that Riekstins was the better candidate and the party fell in line. The union of Latvia's First Party and Latvia's Way (LPP/LC) on May 12 nominated deputy speaker of parliament Karina Petersone for the presidency, after the more popular Interior Minister Ivars Godmanis and Family and Children's Issues Minister Ainars Bastiks withdrew from consideration. Other coalition members Greens and Farmers (ZZS) and Fatherland and Freedom (TB/LNNK) declined to put forward candidates of their own. TP strongly backed Riekstins. So strongly, in fact, that many observers wondered whether they knew from the start he could not win and was simply a straw man. LPP/LC barely gave lip service to Petersone, with party leader Ainars Slesers at one point suggesting that she did not need to meet with other parties because the coalition leadership would decide on the coalition candidate rather than the members of Saeima.

Act II - The real candidates emerge

¶5. (C) Unable to agree on either Riekstins or Petersone as a coalition candidate, coalition leaders came to agreement on a common candidate over the weekend of May 19, with the decision formally announced on May 21. Valdis Zatlers, a physician with no political experience except a short stint in the National Front in the late 1980's, was the choice to

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lead Latvia (Ref C). It is telling that members of Parliament, who would be asked to vote for him, did not have a chance to meet him until after the coalition announced its choice. Zatlers immediately stumbled in press interviews where it was clear he did not have a developed political philosophy and seemed uncomfortable in the press spotlight. Furthermore, his admission that as a doctor he had accepted additional payments for services beyond his fees and did not declare this income on his taxes underscored how quickly he was rushed out as a candidate. While such payments are common practice among Latvian doctors, the more liberal (anti-government) press harped on this as behavior unworthy of a potential head of state. Nevertheless, the coalition felt good because Zatlers and Kalniete were the only candidates formally nominated and everyone believed that Kalniete would have a hard time getting even JL's 18 votes.

¶6. (C) As the period for nominating candidates was closing, left-leaning, ethnic Russian-based Harmony Center filed the nomination of Aivars Endzins, former head of the Constitutional Court, and a respected member of Latvia's legal community (ref D). The coalition was caught flat footed as Endzins clearly had the political experience that Zatlers lacked and did not meet the definition of a "radical" candidate that the government would have expected Harmony Center might nominate. Endzins was given a further boost that same evening, when Kalniete withdrew from the race on national TV and threw her support to Endzins. The coalition attacked Endzins publicly for his role a member of the Communist Party and Secretary of the party chapter at the Latvian University in Soviet days (despite having been a leader in the movement to restore Latvia's independence). Endzins has not aggressively campaigned in the few days since his nomination.

Act III - May 31 in parliament

¶7. (U) Barring any more surprises (which we would not rule out), Saeima members will vote on May 31, choosing between Zatlers and Endzins. In the first round, both names will be

on the ballot and members will vote for one by secret ballot.

If neither candidate gets 51 votes, the one with the most votes will stand alone in a second round of voting. If at any point a candidate receives 51 votes, he is elected president. If no one receives 51 votes, the process starts anew, with the possibility for new nominations, and another vote to be held the week of June 11.

18. (C) At this point, it seems highly unlikely that Endzins could get the 51 votes needed for victory. Zatlers is an open question. If the vote were truly free, we do not think he could win and new elections would be held. But the coalition is pulling out all the stops to ensure victory. Coalition MP's are being lobbied hard and opposition MP's and journalists both believe that coalition MP's will be asked to use their cell phones to photograph their "secret" ballots to show their leaders that they voted the "right" way. Knowing that they cannot get the full 58 votes for Zatlers (one TB member has said she will not vote for him, but also not for Endzins), one coalition source told us that Leopolds Ozolins may be wheeled in from the hospital, where he is recovering from a massive stroke. Ozolins may not be able to speak or walk, but he should be able to vote.

What does it all mean?

19. (C/NF) If this process were a play or a movie, it would make for great entertainment. The twists and turns have been unexpected and, at times, unbelievable. Unfortunately, it is not a play, but the process for choosing the head of state of a NATO ally and EU member state. There is no question that, having won the election and formed a government, the coalition is entitled to pick a president that it feels best for the job. Unfortunately, by any rational measure, their definition of best applies not to the state's interests but to themselves. One observer said last fall that the criteria for the next president would be "someone who signs any piece of paper put in front of him" rather than making the kinds of difficult choices that Vike-Freiberga has in her eight years in office. Zatlers seems to be such a person. With no defined political philosophy to guide his decisions, and credible reports that his staff has already been selected for him from among coalition lackeys, there would be a significant weakening in the already tame constitutional powers of the office. The attempts to amend the security laws this spring, stopped when Vike-Freiberga used her last-ditch constitutional authority for the first time, were the first serious indication of attempts by the coalition to use its powers to defend its interests, defined as staying in power and protecting its financial backers. But it followed an attempt to put patently unqualified judges on the

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constitutional court that was barely rebuffed by parliament. As one leading journalist said, the only political difference that Zatlers and Endzins expressed since their nominations is that Zatlers believes there are no oligarchs in Latvia, while Endzins says there are. In the end, this journalist said, that may be the most important issue in this race. We agree.

110. (C/NF) In terms of U.S. interests, it is hard to see that either candidate would espouse a significant change in foreign policy because there is general political consensus on those issues. The issue for us, though, is whether Latvia continues and accelerates some worrying trends in terms of rule of law. But perhaps the most significant, and most disturbing, thing about this race has been the general public apathy. No one you talk to on the street is happy with the process but most seem resigned to it as "normal politics." That barely 16 years after the restoration of independence, Latvians see this process as the normal course of democracy is probably the element that should concern us most.

WASER